OCTÓGONO CADERNOS DE POLISSEMIA ARTÍSTICA

ISSN 2976-0402

Número 29

Julho de 2026

Autoria e edição: Paulo Martins Oliveira

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GOYESQUE WRATH ACCORDING TO ANTONI GAUDÍ

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Synopsis This study addresses the bicorne-dragon as an instrument of collective and individual self-criticism, for which Gaudí modeled ambiguities and superimposed different layers of meaning in Casa Batlló.

Keywords Antoni Gaudí; Casa Batlló; Barcelona; Catalonia; Francisco de Goya; Eugène Delacroix.

Cover image Francisco de Goya, *Courtyard with Lunatics*, det., Meadows Museum [commons.wikimedia.org].

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In the previous contribution (#28), dedicated to the famous dragon atop Casa Batlló, a comparative study was carried out aiming to identify that element as also representing a Napoleonic bicorne hat, satirizing whoever appeared on the narrow balcony-pulpit immediately below.

Casa Batlló, det. [commons.wikimedia.org/BernardGagnon].

However, Gaudí did not limit himself to a mere playful artifice, for, understanding and following the logic of the best artistic creations, he worked on the threshold of ambiguity to add layers of meaning and thus broaden the intellectual scope of his design.

Continuing the sequential analysis of this building, it is now important to examine how the architect inscribed within it a collective and individual self-criticism, typically expiatory and allegorizing the need for improvement in the face of a corrupting demon of the soul.

In this way, the fact that the dragon is pierced from below upwards does not only refer to the intrinsic instability of evil itself, which will inevitably collapse due to its internal rivalries and betrayals. In other words, it is not a strictly theological and eschatological issue concerning fallen angels, insofar as it also involves their human allies, who do everything to obtain and maintain earthly power.

Consequently, and while the Day of Judgment and the great and definitive defeat of evil had not yet arrived, the rises and falls of earthly powerful figures continued to repeat and succeed one another, contaminating and dragging entire populations along, which cyclically either furiously overthrow some oppressive regime, or support some tyrant to end the anarchy, restarting the violence.

Succeeding each other alternately and dispersedly in time and space, these episodes of instability experienced a new development in the transition from the 18th to the 19th century. Then, the French Revolution and especially soon after Napoleon were equivalent to a kind of "fragmentation bomb" that exploded in multiple simultaneous bursts throughout Europe, and whose echoes reverberated until the time of Gaudí, with Barcelona proving quite susceptible to phenomena of radicalism (ironically, such fury will posthumously affect the architect's own legacy).

In fact, even some one hundred years later, at the beginning of the 20th century, the traumatic memory was so present that, for example, a large part of the Italian population believed that the *Mona Lisa* was in France because it had been stolen on Napoleon's orders, thus "justifying" the famous theft at the Louvre in 1911.

In his profound contradictions, Napoleon Bonaparte, initially promising, became an ambivalent symbol of both the old absolutist aristocracy of the Ancien Régime, and the revolutionary Terror that followed the execution of Louis XVI, like two faces of the same dragon, which therefore also seems to allegorize a colourful and multifaceted chameleon.

For this visual construction, Gaudí demonstrates that he considered several artistic precedents related to this issue, which is, moreover, natural and expected, as will be systematically argued as follows.

• Napoleon's emblematic bicorne was also evocative of the revolutionary period[1], when this type of hat was iconographically used to allude to the radicalism of the French army and the idea that the Revolution should not only be defended, but also militarily exported to other countries.

Examples

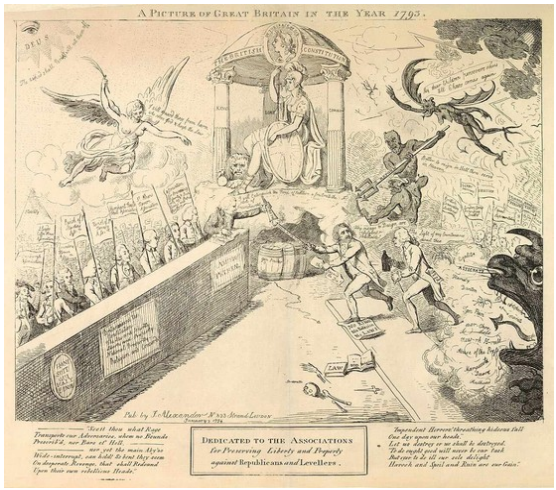
Unauthored coloured print from 1789, *The Memorable Day at Versailles on Monday, October 5, 1789*, det., BNF [commons.wikimedia.org].
A depiction of revolutionary excesses.

Rights of Man alias French Liberty alias Entering Volunteers for the Republic
Vive la Liberté
Come along my brave Volunteers

Isaac Cruikshank, *Rights of man alias French liberty alias entering volunteers for the republic*, British Museum [commons.wikimedia.org].
A 1793 caricature depicting the recruitment of French "volunteers" to fight for the Revolution.

1 Along with the Phrygian cap.

Triomphe de Marat
Jugement du Tribunal Révolutionnaire qui déclare Jud. Marat innocent et ordonne qu'il soit mis sur le champ en liberté.
immortel défenseur du Peuple et de ses Droits,
il terrassa les grands et renversa le Trône,
fonda l'Egalité sur la chute des Rois:
de la vertu civique Offrons-lui la Couronne!


A Picture of Great Britain in the Year 1793.
Dedicated to the Associations for Preserving Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers.

Unauthored etching from 1793, *Marat's triumph*, Library of Congress, US [commons.wikimedia.org].
Isaac Cruikshank (attr.), *A Picture of Great Britain in the Year 1793*, British Museum [commons.wikimedia.org].
A depiction of the radical author Marat with a laurel wreath suggesting a bicorne hat; and an engraving warning against attempts to bring the revolutionary large "dragon" to the United Kingdom.

- Immediately in those early years of the Revolution, many royalists, religious figures, and even moderate revolutionaries were imprisoned and later massacred (e.g. September 1792). Some of these prisons, such as Charenton, gained infamous notoriety, as they were also asylums for the mentally ill, thus aiming to increase the psychological pressure on political prisoners[2].

Example

Francisco de Goya, *Courtyard with Lunatics*, Meadows Museum [commons.wikimedia.org].
Above this insane/prisoner's head, Goya simulated a bicorne hat, allegorizing that the truly lunatic ones were the radical revolutionary leaders.

2 On this issue, see Herwin H. Ackerknecht, "Political prisoners in French mental institutions before 1789, during the Revolution, and under Napoleon I," publ. online by Cambridge University Press.

The previous detail from Goya (1794), an artist who inspired many others throughout Europe. Some official depictions of Napoleon may contain a sarcastic subtext, perhaps inspired by the goyesque madman.
Unauthored litograph, *Napoleon Bonaparte*, det., Musée Carnavalet [commons.wikimedia.org].
Unauthored litograph, *Napoleon Bonaparte*, det., Musée Carnavalet [commons.wikimedia.org].
Unauthored engraving, *Napoleon Bonaparte*, det., Musée Carnavalet [commons.wikimedia.org].

• From his youth and throughout his career, Goya also revealed a critical sense towards the traditional aristocratic elites, absolutist power, and the Inquisition, enshrining various criticisms in his works[3]. The Old Regime and the Revolution were two sides of the same oppression.

• It should be noted that liberal figures like Schiller harbored hopes regarding the Revolution, only to be disappointed shortly afterwards. Soon after, others (like Beethoven) would experience further disillusionment, this time concerning Napoleon, who became a symbol of this entire turbulent period (1789-1815), and whose consequences reverberated through the following decades.

• Frequently drawing inspiration from the works of Bosch (to which he had privileged access), Goya reinvented the infernal panel of the *Garden of Earthly Delights* to create a character that, among other related issues (e.g. *Hercules Furens*), alludes to the way in which the Mad Revolution "devours its children".

3 For example, consider “Francisco de Goya e os retratos absolutistas de Godoy e Fernando VII” / *Octógono* extra number (5) / Sept.12, 2024 [academia.edu | archive.org].

Jheronimus Bosch, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, det., Prado [commons.wikimedia.org].
Francisco de Goya, *Saturn devouring his son*, Prado [commons.wikimedia.org].
Bosch allegorized the hangover after the "party" (in the central panel) and the way in which the Habsburg allies were now being devoured in Hell. Adapting the image, Goya's *Saturn* devours a human figure, whose body also suggests a wineskin that fuels the drunkenness and madness of the gigantic character.

- Thus, Goya's *Saturn* represents the "drunken", uncontrolled popular fury that will bring misfortune to all.

Francisco de Goya, *The Colossus*, Prado [commons.wikimedia.org].
The conscientious part of the population tries to escape the misfortune that will be amplified by the enraged vast majority (personified in the wrathful Herculean *Colossus*).

• This figure of the *Colossus* relates to the paintings *The Second of May* and *The Third of May*, in which the irresponsible fury of one individual leads to the execution of his innocent brother.

Francisco de Goya, *The Second of May*, Prado [commons.wikimedia.org].
Francisco de Goya, *The Third of May*, Prado [commons.wikimedia.org].

• However, this does not imply complacency towards injustice and repression, but rather a call for intelligent resistance, in the manner that, for example, Pieter Bruegel subtly allegorized in his works[4].

• Even when fighting for just and relatable causes, wrath is counterproductive and always turns against those who allow themselves to be consumed by this feeling, as often warned by Seneca – a figure from pagan antiquity whose Stoic virtues have always earned particular respect from Christian culture[5]. In one of his moral writings specifically dedicated to this matter, he noted, "For a man to stand forth as the defender of parents, children, friends, and fellow-citizens, led merely by his sense of duty, acting voluntarily, using judgement, using foresight, moved neither by impulse nor by fury — this is noble and becoming". The same author also resorted to mythological fiction to highlight this issue, as can be seen in his play *Hercules Furens*, in which, seized by a furious madness, the great hero ended up massacring his own family[6].

4 See *Octógono* n.24 / Feb. 2026 – "Os pelicanos de Camões e o Bucéfalo de Filipe II", p.7 [academia.edu | archive.org]; as well as *The political consciousness of Pieter Bruegel*, 2014 [academia.edu], coll. in *Northern Art. Studies 2012-2016* [archive.org].

5 For example, since the pagan author could not be placed in Paradise, Dante nevertheless granted the "moral Seneca" a place in Limbo, protecting him from the great torments destined for true sinners (DANTE Alighieri, *Divine Comedy – Inferno*, c.IV); Even Saint Augustine had hinted at a possible connection between Seneca and Christianity (*The City of God*, b,VI, ch.XI).

6 Quotation from Lucius SENECA, *On Anger*, b.II, in *Moral Essays*, vol.I, Heinermann, 1928, p.139. In regard to the artistic and moral representation of fury itself, see *Octógono* n.15 / May, 2025 – "Os bustos na Portaria dos Jerónimos – identificação e significado" [academia.edu | archive.org], coll. in *Segundo Octógono* [academia.edu | archive.org].

• Throughout the 19th century and in the context of the post-Napoleonic shockwaves, other artists would continue to develop allegories on the capacity of the furious great collective to attract individuals to its ranks.

• For example, while praising the reasons and intentions of the revolutionaries of 1830, Eugène Delacroix criticized their radicalism and tumultuous consequences, which were part of a continuous rotation between the old, decadent autocracy and the new revolutionary anarchies.

Eugène Delacroix, *The Death of Sardanaplus*, Louvre [commons.wikimedia.org].
Eugène Delacroix, *Liberty Leading the People*, Louvre [commons.wikimedia.org/Shonagon].
To illustrate this dichotomy, Delacroix drew inspiration from Géricault's famous *Raft* to create games of visual interaction between viewers and artworks.
In the first case, the viewer is invited to enter the debauchery of absolute and self-destructive power, while in the second painting the (frightened) artist has included himself in this overwhelming group that is preparing to "run over" the very observers of the work.

• As mentioned, this logic continued and, among other examples, decades later the nostalgic, decadent imperialism of Napoleon III gave way to the fury of the Paris Commune.

• Since French socio-political life was in some ways a precursor to several European countries, in neighboring Spain there were also systematic internal crises, characterized by radicalism between the parties, giving rise to some collective and individual self-criticism on the part of the more conscientious.

• In Barcelona, this double act of contrition was performed at Casa Batlló. Topped by one of the city's symbols (the dragon of St. George), this building served as a collective examination of conscience in terms of growing radicalism and even corruption. In this latter aspect, the small and

attractive colored discs (≈ coins/scales) that "fall" down the facade are of interest here, recalling the corrupting interpretations associated with Danaë, as well as the treacherous sale of Jesus Christ (Mt. 27:9).

Comparative example[7]

≈

Jheronimus Bosch, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, det., Prado [commons.wikimedia.org].
Facade of the Casa Batlló in an early 20th-century postcard [commons.wikimedia.org].
In terms of intrinsic meaning, the suggestion of the imperial Habsburg orb corresponds to the dragon in Casa Batlló, while the corrupt elites of the Garden (Coudenberg) are equivalent to the people who appear on the multiple balconies with devilish eyes.

• In turn, the well-known suggestion of a bat on the lower half of the Casa Batlló facade seems to open another layer of meaning. Although this element was once part of the coat of arms of the city of Barcelona, it is better known as a heraldic symbol of the city of Valencia. That is, the facade could allude to the Catalan-speaking Mediterranean region, which is tempted by violence and corruption.

• Thus, instead of becoming a thriving maritime zone, this entire area was allowed to turn into an infected, albeit colorful and "attractive" swamp, with the central pulpit resembling a (carnivorous?) flower and the multiple balconies suggesting ambiguous heads of dragonflies, frogs, or large-eyed fish.

7 Regarding the crucial political and social component of Bosch's works, see the various contributions gathered in *Northern Art. Studies 2012-2016* [archive.org], as well as the book *Jheronimus Bosch – o relojoeiro dos símbolos*.

• Considering the Christian artistic tradition, it is highly unlikely that Gaudí did not include himself in this scenic exercise. To that end, he may have played with his own first name (Antoni) to make a penitential self-criticism, namely for not having the courage to address that pulpit and, subjecting himself to ridicule, try at least to convince his irresponsible compatriots (≈ Sermon of St. Anthony to the Fishes, in the context of the conversion of the Cathars in the Adriatic region).

Comparative example

Jheronimus Bosch, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, det., Prado [commons.wikimedia.org].
A desperate exhortation to the corrupt in the central panel.

• Jesus was ridiculed on the cross. In this context, Antoni Gaudí demonstrated his reservations about taking up his "cross" and having a more interventionist and direct role in moderating the situation in his Catalan homeland (note that the balcony-pulpit has lateral elements that extend sideways and suggest a cruciform shape). Similarly, the petals also hint at flames, perhaps alluding to preachers martyred by fire, but also to the inquisitorial sins of the Church itself in the past.

Casa Batlló, det. [commons.wikimedia.org/BernardGagnon].

In brief, Gaudí avoided oversimplification and made Casa Batlló not only an allegory for external evil, but also for the fallibility of each individual, beginning with the architect himself, reluctant to accept his place on the cross and, if necessary, face the dragon's claws.

More than revolutions or old tyrants, humility and moderation were needed in Catalonia, which should recover its identity and greatness by focusing on its own tradition, made of educated know-how.

And at least in this, Gaudí set an exceptional example with his buildings, which are neither completely secular nor exclusively religious, since Humanity, inhabiting this City of Men, aspires to move to the City of God...